

Why Malthus is Not a Social Hero Like Darwin

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Aristotle, Da Vinci, Darwin, and... Malthus?

Human societies have been shaped by surges in intellectual advances often spurred by single individuals. Some are revered and some are forgotten but Aristotle, Da Vinci and Darwin stand pretty much in a league of their own. The way humans think about themselves and their world through physics, philosophy, and social lenses was changed by these intellectual giants.

But there is one name yet to be added. Thomas Malthus dealt with difficult questions of human nature and his teachings have yet to be applied.

Not so Aristotle, whose intellectual range was vast, covering most of the sciences and many of the arts. He was the founder of formal logic and his work remains a powerful current in contemporary philosophical debate.

Then there was Leonardo da Vinci, whose genius as a painter, draftsman, sculptor, architect, and engineer, perhaps more than that of any other figure, epitomized the Renaissance humanist ideal. His notebooks reveal a spirit of

scientific inquiry and a mechanical inventiveness that were centuries ahead of their time.

Charles Darwin was a naturalist whose scientific theory of evolution by natural selection became the foundation of modern evolutionary studies. The new evolutionary narrative rapidly spread through all of science, literature, and politics and profoundly changed the way humans viewed themselves and the world around them.

In contrast to these timeless greats, Thomas Malthus is now little more than an arcane historical footnote, not widely studied yet regularly panned by the economic establish-

ment. However, Darwin and many scientists found inspiration in Malthus' writings even as they were spurned by the commercial world.

Whereas Darwin, da Vinci and Aristotle opened our minds to a world of wonder, a world of progressive change for all, Malthus held forth a view which presented difficult choices. And these difficult choices required significant sacrifices by the powers of the day.

Malthus laid out the principle causes of societies' failure down through the ages, an im-

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Thomas Robert Malthus, 1766 - 1834
(as painted by John Linnell, Wikimedia Commons)

measurably valuable revelation of cause and effect. Malthus was an observer of history and was the first to try to explain past events in history through the application of logic and mathematics. Yet he has been ignored and even ridiculed by commercial and political elites who rightly saw his concepts as direct threats to their own prosperity and power.

He noted:

- the inevitability of repeated social collapse given the human tendency to reproduce,
- the surges in population and collapses of societies through history,
- the very high rates of population growth in new lands,
- the impossibility of sustaining high rates of growth,
- the inequality in industrial development and social structure,
- the food inefficiency of meat production.

Malthus called for an end to growth, higher real wages, reductions in inequality and an economic focus on providing material sustenance for the poor rather than luxury goods for the rich. In effect, he proposed more wealth and power to the middle class and a reduction in poverty, all while removing a good part of the means of wealth accumulation for the rich (cheap labour and asset inflation).

The nobility of late 18th century England were no more open to hearing Malthus' proposals than today's bankers, media corporations, developers and cheap labour employers are of hearing about sustainability, a broad-based economy or the re-writing of globalism with new humanist-based goals. Hence the attacks from every point of the elite compass to halt the spread of this kind of conversation.

This is a huge loss for humanity because the intelligence that Malthus contributed to public discussion was different in nature from those of the other three icons. Instead of lifting humanity up to new heights of moral or technical understanding, Malthus illuminated what it would take for human societies to endure. By analyzing the reasons for the repeated failure of civilizations, Malthus opened the door to finding the path not previously travelled, the one which circumvents population cycles and reveals the mechanism of sustainability.

Where Aristotle clarified thinking on philosophy and advanced many forms of science through the process of logic, Da Vinci inspired that world of science and the love of form, and Darwin utterly transformed our understanding of geological and biological time and processes, Malthus showed the key flaws in humanity's attempt to build permanent progress and social stability.

Humanity does not lack for technological cleverness or the drive to improve or to learn about the world around us. What humanity lacks

is an understanding of why our societies repeatedly fail and what changes we must make to assure that we can cross the threshold to both stability and progress.

The other greats gave society the ability to make great strides forward. Malthus, if applied, would allow our societies to stop sliding back repeatedly. If the teachings / research / findings / conclusions of Malthus had been followed, allowing humanity to avoid the wars, famines, plagues and societal upheavals that are part and parcel of every population cycle, it would have marked the greatest advance in human history since the development of agriculture and the formation of towns: a way for towns and higher-order societies to progress steadily without collapse. It would make eternal progress possible rather than dooming society to inevitable failure with the impossible pursuit of eternal growth.

Although completely mainstream today, the findings of Darwin were a direct contradiction of core religious teachings and thus initially ran into huge criticism from many quarters. On the other hand, Malthus' suggestions advocated a fundamental change in social priorities, wealth creation and distribution. It was a direct attack on the wealthy, their pocket-books, their pride and their power. Hence, his proposals were much more of a challenge to the social order from which elites have profited throughout time than even Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was to the Church of the day.

Yes, Malthus will repeatedly be held out as a failed prophet by the growth-addicted elites. But they will always fail to mention the accuracy of his historical observations, the undeniability of

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his mathematics and the fact that simply because our modern society has not collapsed does not mean that we are not in a cycle.

Malthus looked at regional and national population cycles to the limit of the data available to him over 200 years ago. Today, we are in a global cycle composed of many smaller interlocked national cycles. However, the data we have available to us now stretches back thousands of years with detail and extent that Malthus could never have dreamed of. All of this supports his contentions and should give us cause, along with the micro-fracturing appearing in most countries, to embrace his cautions and deal with the issues of population

and consumption in ways that have simply never been possible before in human history.

If we can do that, then Malthus may yet be elevated to his rightful place beside the illustrious greats of humankind.

Some relevant quotations from Malthus in the flowery prose of the period:

Equality

"In the same manner, although we cannot possibly expect to exclude riches and poverty from society; yet if we could find out a mode of government by which the numbers in the extreme regions would be lessened and the numbers in the middle regions increased, it would undoubtedly be our duty to adopt it."

Understand what is, don't long for what should be

"The moment we allow ourselves to ask why some things are not otherwise, instead of

endeavouring to account for them as they are, we shall never know where to stop; we shall be led into the grossest and most childish absurdities; all progress in the knowledge of the ways of Providence must necessarily be at an end; and the study will cease to be an improving exercise of the human mind.” (Dogma replaces critical thought.)

Reluctance to Migrate

“We know well from repeated experience, how much misery and hardship men will undergo in their own country, before they can determine to desert it; and how often the most tempting proposals of embarking for new settlements have been rejected by people who appeared to be almost starving.”

History of Population Cycles

“If the proposition between the natural increase of population and food which I have given be in any degree near the truth, it will appear, on the contrary, that the period when the number of men surpass their means of subsistence has long since arrived; and that this oscillation, this constantly subsisting cause of periodical misery, has existed ever since we have had any histories of mankind, does exist at present, and will forever continue to exist, unless some decided change takes place in the physical constitution of our nature.”

Extreme Growth Rates in new American Colonies

“Throughout all the northern colonies, the population was found to double itself in 25 years. The original number of persons who settled in the four provinces of New England in 1643 was 21,200. Afterwards it was supposed that more left them than went to them. In 1760, they were increased to half a million. They had therefore all along doubled their own number in 25 years. In New Jersey the period of doubling appeared to be 22 years and in Rhode Island still less. In the back settlements, where inhabitants applied themselves strictly to agriculture and luxury was not known, they were found to double their own number in 15 years, a most extraordinary instance of increase.”

Exponential growth

“Taking the population of the world at any number, a thousand millions, for instance, the human species would increase in the ratio of 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256, 512 etc and subsistence as 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 etc. In two centuries and a quarter, the population would be to the means of subsistence as 512 to 10, in 3 centuries, 4096 to 13 and in two thousand years, the difference would be almost incalculable, though the produce in that time would have increased to an immense extent.”

Cause of Migration

“A great migration necessarily implies unhappiness of some kind or other in the country that is deserted. For few persons will leave their families, connections, friends and native land, to seek settlement in untried foreign climes, without some strong subsisting cause of uneasiness where they are, or without the hope of some great advantages in the place to which they are going.”•

Dedication:

Malthus would probably have enjoyed conversation with Bert McInnis of Ottawa, Canada, and David MacKay of the UK who have both recently passed away. Bert was a co-founder of WhatIf Technologies and applied his expertise spanning mathematics, philosophy, engineering, general system theory and physical and social sciences to the design and implementation of systems models primarily for the exploration of specific problems involving human agency. David brought his mind to bear on many questions including energy conservation and realities of conversion to renewable energy. To make his points clear he published “Sustainable Energy without the hot air” on the website: www.WithoutHotAir.com for free download and also made his famous TED talk video on the subject.

Upon their passing, the path trod by the brilliant becomes quickly overgrown.

John Erik Meyer is President of Canadians for a Sustainable Society. He holds a degree in economics, works as an engineer and medium-tech small business owner, and has published articles on population, immigration, productivity, climate change, economic metrics and energy systems in the Globe and Mail, Financial Post, Toronto Star and other publications.